

# MCC Peace Section Task Force on Women in Church & Society

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## REPORT

Report 15

July, 1977

### FOCUS ON LANGUAGE

Linguistic sexism--does it exist and what does it mean? Robin Lakoff in Language and Woman's Place finds that women experience linguistic discrimination in two ways: in the way they are taught to use language and in the way language use treats them. Both tend to relegate women to certain subservient functions--such as that of sex object or servant. Like Dennis Kohns (see Letters) I believe that a battle over the use of language can remove our eyes from the real heart of the issue--significant social change. Linguistic tokenism can be as deadly as placing one woman on a church board and considering the problem solved. But, that warning considered, I want to say more. Language is important. It is more than a "picky" preoccupation and deserves more serious attention than many of us are ready to concede. Why?

Language is revelatory. Language can offer us clues to our own unconscious attitudes. I remember conversations with two older male friends, both of whom used euphemisms for "woman." One referred to someone as a "girl" (I later discovered she was over 50 years old and when I asked why he used the term he said he thought women liked to be thought of as young) and the other consistently used "lady" (he wanted to show respect). Both had "good intentions" but in recalling youth, sexual and intellectual immaturity (girl) and helplessness and response to flattery (lady), the words convey notions of irresponsibility and frivolity. What underlying attitudes--protectiveness, sexual embarrassment, superiority--lurk in such words? Or perhaps closer to home, what attitude is revealed when the term "woman's lib" rolls off our tongue but never the term "black lib"?

Lakoff points out another way language can be revealing. Women learn to use language differently than men: women have a large stock of words related to their specific interests; tend to use "empty" adjectives such as "divine," "cute"; use question intonation where one might expect declaratives; use hedges such as "well," "kinda"; use the intensive "so," hypercorrect grammar and superpolite forms; tell less jokes (giggle at dirty ones), and speak in italics (using extra emphasis so people don't miss what they say). Some of these patterns, Lakoff says, are used unconsciously by women feminists (as well as by subordinates and intellectual males) giving the impression of uncertainty and lack of directness that undercuts the words they use.

Language is important for clarity. The terms "man," "men," and "he" to designate both "human beings" and "male persons" are clearly ambiguous in current usage. At one time "man," from Old English "mann," similar to the generic Mensch in German, could be used to say, "His mother was a good Christian man." The use of the word has clearly narrowed, heightening the question for women, when am

I included? Ambiguity is particularly confusing to children who get the impression that woman is a "subspecies," included in man. As one child, Sylvia, put in a letter, "Dear God, Are boys better than girls? I know you are one but try to be fair."

Language is a sign of change. Changing language in itself will not end sexual inequality or provide dignity for women, but I believe that linguistic and social change do go hand in hand. "Nigger" became "Negro," "Negro" became "black" as social realities began to change in U.S. history. As does baptism or a name change, creation of new words or resurrection of old ones signifies awareness of new selfhood.

As a basic cultural component, language not only reflects thought but shapes and forms thought. Our use of words can call forth new attitudes, new questions, new images. Concern with how we speak can be a sign of our commitment to uncovering our own unconscious discriminatory attitudes, to careful communication, and to deep-rooted change in male-female relationships where it is needed. Concern with words can be cosmetic; it can also signal a new realization of the depth and power of symbols in our lives. --ggk

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#### GOD LANGUAGE

Language is the basis for communication of images which are conjured up in our minds, thereby pulling together scattered thoughts and strong emotions. An image is the only manner by which we speak of God, but God exhausts, or transcends, our most eloquent use of words. By seeking to expand our imagery of God, we can better understand the Divine, who is so difficult to want to share and serve, to relate to, to be excited about, and to love and obey.

God has traditionally been imagined in masculine imagery ("the old man in the sky"). Biblical and liturgical (prayers, hymns, doxologies, and creeds) expressions

of God are rich with imagery of God as father, king, lord, husband, and other male-oriented descriptions. It is not necessary to totally deny ourselves of all masculine imagery of God (as some have suggested) but masculine imagery has become too much of a good thing! It has excluded the possibilities of other imagery which can be meaningful and helpful for all of us--female and male--in our relationships with God. Imagery of God is cited for purposes of distinguishing and proclaiming qualities/attributes which are important.

Images about God need to be rooted in our concrete and common experience and existence. J.A.T. Robinson in his book, Honest to God (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), notes that often people who are opposed to anything that smacks of God-talk are actually tilted against the traditionally accepted images of God rather than a belief in the love, power and essence of God. Masculine or feminine qualities (fatherhood and motherhood for example) can be used to reach many different people at different times and situations.

One of the most exciting and important results of an increasing consciousness of women has been the opening of tunnel-visioned eyes and minds which have seen and encountered only the masculine imagery of God within the Bible. Slowly biblical scholars are revealing the feminine imagery of God, comparing God to a woman in labor, giving birth to creation, comforting her children, or midwifing (Deut. 32:18; Job 3:12; 38:29-30; Psalm 131:2; Isaiah 42:14; 45:10-11; 49:15; 66:9-13). These passages are examples of God's loving salvation in analogous human situations, including the common experience of motherhood.

Basically, we should be conscious of balancing our feminine and masculine imagery, enhancing as fully as possible the expansion of our personal and corporate relationships with God. There are ways by which this can be inhibited for ourselves and others. One way is to indiscriminately refer to God as "he,"

a pronoun reflecting the Biblical translators'/writers' exclusively masculine imagery. "He" is appropriate when we are relating God analogously to masculine imagery.

And if we truly believe God has no exclusively masculine (or feminine) identity, then why not refer to God as "she" when we are using feminine imagery? To be consciously reluctant to use a feminine pronoun when appropriate is to restrict certain possibilities of relating to God. And what about those numerous times when our references to God are neither feminine or masculine? It seems that neither a masculine nor feminine pronoun is appropriate. The repetitious usage of an inappropriate masculine pronoun, "he," is no less redundant than repeating the noun, "God."

The inclusion of feminine imagery of God into my total imagery of God has made a difference in my relationship with God. Imagery which is common to my experience as a woman has blossomed my interest and receptivity to the word of God. The masculine-laden tradition is heavily imprinted upon our minds, but the spiritual freedom to include feminine (biblical) images of God can catapult all of us into a whole new depth of relationship with God!

*Sally Dyck is a student at Boston University School of Theology, working on a Master of Divinity degree. She grew up in the Menno Mennonite Church, Ritzville, Washington.*

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#### WORDS--WALLS OR BRIDGES?

We've got a language problem.

Some words in our language build walls, shutting people out, rather than inviting them in. The resulting problems are real, the hurts painful, and the broken spirits and unused talents an utter tragedy. Other words serve as bridges linking one with another, healing, freeing, opening wide the vistas of relationship and service.

Words serve as symbols of a larger reality. They can do as much damage as a sword or gun in destroying potential and life itself. The old jingle "sticks and stones can break my bones but words can never hurt me" is the ultimate irony. Words are power. Words communicate or cut off communication. They are one of our major links with the world, others, ourselves. Vital. Essential. Never, never underestimate the power of words, whether written, spoken, sung, screamed, whispered.

That's why "feminists" (a loaded word!) react so strongly to the maleness of our English language. All those loved, revered, nearly sacred phrases of the church and religion such as "brotherhood," "fellowship," "church of our fathers," "he," "mankind," etc., are double duty words. In one context they serve as inclusive words which encompass all persons, regardless of age, sex, color, creed. In another context, they are exclusive, conveying a very limited frame of reference. If you are male, you get included either way. But if you are female, there's always the question of who or what is really meant.

But . . .

After five years of struggling with my own feelings on the language question of getting angry, feeling excluded, hurt, dumped on, and so forth, I've decided to stop wasting my time and energy on something I cannot change. What lies behind my frustration has been wanting to share my gifts and time with the church, gifts and time I feel God is calling me to use, gifts and time the church has not always been willing or able to use simply because I come equipped with the wrong plumbing system. And feeling frustrated and unwanted I've projected all that on to symbols, like words. No more.

Until we concoct, stumble across, or scientifically create neutral words which will be socially and religiously acceptable, I do not intend to get bogged down in a battle over words, religious or otherwise. There is too much to be done. There's a big wide world out there with real live people in it. People crying out for love, acceptance, liberation,

laughter, work, play . . . the newness of life centered in Christ.

Not that I intend to ignore words, those important bridge or wall builders. As a writer, talker, and avid reader, I love words. I gorge myself on words as some do on food. But I simply refuse to get sidetracked from the larger reality, that of being a channel of God's love and liberation in everyday life in a variety of ways. Life, discipleship is not a crusade in which we go marching off into the sunset waving our banners and swords cutting down everyone who gets in our way or disagrees with us. Life in Christ is a pilgrimage in which we reach out and invite others to come with us.

And so I do what I can do. When possible, in my writing, speaking, and relating, I substitute "he/she" for "he," "People" for "man," "community" for "brotherhood," "chairperson" for "chairman," etc., even when it seems a bit awkward. And when we sing those old familiar hymns at church I enjoy belting out "Rise up oh women of God" or "Faith of our mothers" and hearing the giggles around me.

As with a lot of other problems that face us, we all need a sense of humor so that we can laugh at ourselves and problems, precisely because things are so real, so important, and the changes needed so immense. Whether theologian, pastor, leader, follower, drop-out or whatever, we need to stop taking ourselves (and our words) so seriously and get on with the business of being disciples by communicating the gospel and its message of liberation by word and deed to all persons, male and female.

*Joyce Shutt, a writer and homemaker from Orrtanna, PA, is active in leadership both in her home congregation and in the wider General Conference Mennonite Church.*

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## NEW LANGUAGE, NEW TIMES

Review of Words and Women: New Language in New Times. Casey Miller and Kate Swift. New York: Anchor Press, 1976, \$8.95.

The authors of this book are no strangers to those of us searching for a language that fits our experience. As freelance writers and editors they have had a number of articles published on women and language. While some of the material in this book is familiar, it's refreshing to encounter it again in an expanded and occasionally witty form.

The first chapter which is on naming customs sets the tone by looking at the basis for our linguistic bias; it is followed by a captivating section on the background and use of "man." After explaining how at one time the English word "mann" meant a human being (a wifman was an adult female person, a carlman an adult male person) the authors interject, "One cannot help but wonder what would have happened to the word that originally meant a human being if females rather than males had dominated the society in which English evolved through its first thousand years. Would "man still mean a human being, but especially an adult female? (p. 28)."

Throughout the book there are references to children; their understanding of language, how the frequent use of the pronouns he and his affect them, how language expectations differ for boys and girls, and how children's images of God develop. Parents cannot shelter their children from the pervading male language any more than they can keep them unaware of violence in our society, but they should be conscious of the endless way it impresses them.

Since my introduction to authors Swift and Miller was through Christian periodicals

I expected this book to dwell heavily on the language of religion. However, the subject was covered in one short chapter. Biblical translation "mistakes" are mentioned as well as the efforts being made to overcome the masculinized symbolization of God. One popular way of doing this is to speak of the "feminine" and "masculine" attributes of God which the authors see as jumping from the frying pan into the fire since no words are "more slippery or more given to stereotyping than these." A change they encourage, and one I find helpful, is using more verbs than nouns when speaking of God--for example the use of "ruling" rather than "king." "Positions of power have traditionally been held by men, and so the noun forms used to describe images of power have for the most part been masculine. Women, however, have exerted power in other areas of life . . . . since the verb form is a more dynamic form, it is more open to additional meaning that women's experience may bring to it. (p. 81)"

The book contains enough examples of words and language that exclude women to disturb the reader. But there is also hope--there are examples of inclusive lan-

guage. Some may feel that such language is awkward, but that very awkwardness can serve a purpose of reminding us that all persons are not male. And in spite of grammarians' efforts to the contrary, "they" is already used as an alternative to "he/she"; examples of how Shakespeare and F. Scott Fitzgerald used this plural pronoun are given. In most cases the words to include us women are already available--we only need to choose to use them.

As a woman who has decided not to take her husband's name, and who on occasion tries to prepare non-sexist worship experiences for groups, I've come to a real appreciation for the strength words and names have. This book helped to increase my understanding and gave me a needed boost!

*Joan Gerig, Winnipeg, Manitoba, is presently a MCC (Canada) volunteer in development education. This summer she and her husband, Orlando Redekopp, will begin an MCC assignment in Botswana.*

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#### RELATED RESOURCES

Collins, Sheila. "Adam's Illusion." Engage/Soc Action, June 1975, pp. 10-12. A response to Dick Johnson's warning in "God: The Father" (Engage/Soc Action, March 1975) that male biblical images should not be tampered with.

Graham, Alma. "How to Make Trouble: The Making of a Nonsexist Dictionary." MS., December 1973.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Nonsexist Language Guidelines." Section I, "Inclusion of Females," available for 50¢ with stamped self-addressed envelope from Alma Graham, 3G, 380 Riverside Drive, New York, N.Y. 10025.

"Guidelines for Equal Treatment of the Sexes in McGraw-Hill Book Company Publications." Single copy free from McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1221 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020. Similar guidelines available from Holt, Rinehart and Winston; Houghton Mifflin Company; Macmillan; Random House; Scott, Foresman and Company.

Hanson, Paul. Masculine Metaphors for God and Sex Discrimination in the Old Testament." Ecumenical Review 27 (October '75): 316-24.

Lakoff, Robin. Language and Woman's Place. New York: Harper and Row, 1975. A linguist looks at men's and women's speech patterns, women and politeness, talk about women.

- Lawrence, Barbara. "Dirty Words Can Harm You." Redbook, May 1974.
- Mawson, Rey O'Day. "Why All the Fuss About Language?" Post American (now Sojourners), August-September 1974. A short personal, biblical reflection.
- Miller, Casey and Kate Swift. "Women and the Language of Religion." Christian Century, April 14, 1976, pp. 353-58. Adapted from their book Words and Women. See Words and Women for further bibliography.
- Nilsen, Alleen Pace. "Grammatical Gender and Its Relationship to the Equal Treatment of Males and Females in Children's Books," a thesis submitted for Ph.D. in the College of Education in the Graduate College of the University of Iowa, 1973.
- Russel, Letty, ed. Watch for "The Liberating Word: A Guide to Nonsexist Interpretation of the Bible," scheduled for publication by the Division of Education and Ministries of the National Council of Churches.
- Strainchamps, Ethel. "Our Sexist Language." In Vivian Gornick and Barbara K. Moran, eds., Woman in Sexist Society. New York: Basic Books, 1971.
- Tavard, George H. "Sexist Language in Theology." Theological Studies 36 (December 1975): 700-24. A Catholic defends the generic use of the masculine gender arguing that current polemic rests on linguistic misunderstandings but calls for fundamental restructuring of religious and social symbols.
- Trible, Phyllis. "Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation." Journal of the American Academy of Religion 41 (March 1973), pp. 35-42.
- Women and Worship: A Guide to Non-Sexist Hymns, Prayers, and Liturgies, by Sharon Neuffer Emswiler and Thomas Neuffer Emswiler. Harper and Row, \$5.95.

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#### LETTERS

Dear Gayle,

Thank you for the Task Force Report!! It has been very helpful and informative. I have been borrowing a friend's copy until now and due to the fact that I would like to save some of the articles, I wish you would put my on your mailing list. Keep up the great work!

Peace!

Barb Kassebaum  
Ritzvilla, WA

Dear Sister Gayle,

I just received my first copy of the report from the MCC Peace Section Task Force on Women in Church and Society. I found it most stimulating and am looking forward to further issues in the future. I found myself in sympathy with concerns that were raised on the influence of T.V. in shaping all our minds. I want to wish you and all who work with you God's blessing in this work.

In a note at the bottom of page five, in the May 1977 issue, you ask a question concerning "women and language," and ask for comments. I don't know if I as a male can fully identify with the impact that many women feel when we use male nouns or pronouns to refer to all humanity, but I fear that such a battle over the use of language may remove our eyes from the real heart of the issue--equal respect and opportunity for women as persons. Indeed it is true that language reflects the contemporary state of any society, and "my language is the limit of my thought." But it is only a reflection! Language is not the real issue. Change in society will bring change in the use of language. To struggle for change in liturgical language or pick at the words used in an article is to get lost in a tangent.

For myself, I am attempting to clean up my own language by using words "humanity" for "mankind or man," and in reference to the Church as a "brotherhood" using

"community" or "Community of the Spirit."

I would appreciate any response that you might have.

Sincerely,  
Dennis R. Kuhns  
Harmonsborg, PA

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#### NEWS

Nancy Swartzentruber Lapp replaces Luann Habegger Martin as a U.S. member of the Peace Section Task Force on Women in Church and Society. Currently a music therapist from Albany, Oregon, Nancy has worked in family therapy, helped direct seven marriage enrichment seminars for Mennonite couples between 1972-75, and edits a monthly newsletter of a local league of Women Voters. Nancy has three children and is married to James M. Lapp. Luann, who chaired the Task Force for three years, is completing a master's degree in political science (her special interest is women and development) at American University in Washington, D.C.

Mabel Paetkau from Abbotsford, BC, will join the Task Force in place of Emma LaRoque who resigned because of other responsibilities. Mabel is a registered nurse but is currently working teaching crafts in the New Horizons program for senior citizens. She is a weaver and is interested in other arts as well. Mabel has two sons and is married to Walter Paetkau.

Anna Mary Brubacher replaces Margaret Reimer as a Canadian member of the Task Force. A native Pennsylvanian now resident in Kitchener, Ontario, Anna Mary teaches high school English and is active in WMSC. She comes from the Mennonite Church and is married to Rev. Glen Brubacher. Margaret, who served for three years on the Task Force, is Assistant Editor of the Mennonite Reporter.

"New Men, New Roles," a study guide by Perry and Liz Yoder will be available from the General Conference Mennonite

Church, Box 347, Newton, KS, 67114 in August. Liz looks at men in the family from a sociological point of view. Perry explores the issue theologically.

"Single Adults in the Church," a retreat sponsored by the Commission on Education of the G.C. Mennonite Church will be held at Laurelville Mennonite Church Center, Pennsylvania, July 3-6. Men and women who are single, widowed, separated or divorced, ministers and other interested persons are welcome to attend. Write the Commission at Box 346, Newton, KS 67114 for a brochure.

Women and the Mennonite World Conference (Kansas 1978) has been one focus of Task Force energies during the past year. At least one seed has sprouted. The Task Force has agreed to coordinate raising \$10,000 (the amount will be matched by the World Conference) for travel costs for women from Third World countries to the conference. Most Third World official delegates, whose travel costs are subsidized by North American funds, are male. Contributions can be sent to the MCC Peace Section Travel Fund for Women, 21 S. 12th St., Akron, PA, 17501.

"Many Gifts, One Spirit" More than 250 Church of the Brethren women gathered at Elizabethtown College, Elizabethtown, PA over Memorial Day weekend for a conference on the role and status of women in the Church of the Brethren. With the theme, "Many Gifts, One Spirit," the conference provided an opportunity for Church of the Brethren women to rejoice in their common heritage, to affirm their many gifts, and to discover ways to offer these gifts to the church and the world.

The conference spent one day focusing on each of three different areas: Personal Growth; Women and the Church; and Women in Community and Global outreach. Thirty-four workshops were led by different Brethren women who shared of their time and talents. Samples of personal growth workshops offered were: Being Single; Aging; Communication Skills; Parenting; Biblical View of the Family;

Nonviolence in the Home; Claiming Positive Self-Images; and Coping with Divorce.

--reported by Ramona Smith Moore

#### Showdown on Pregnancy Discrimination

The right to equal disability benefit coverage for pregnancy was denied by the Supreme Court in the case of Gilbert v. General Electric. The Gilbert decision has a particularly severe impact on low-income workers who are forced to take unpaid maternity leave at a time when expenses are increased by the addition of a new family member.

Business and insurance lobbies are rapidly

organizing to do battle against legislation introduced in March to protect pregnant women from job-related discrimination. H.R. 5055 and S. 995, which extend Title VII of the Civil Rights Act to encompass discrimination on the basis of pregnancy, got off to a strong start with numerous cosponsors lending their support. However, the legislation could be seriously threatened during the summer months if weakening amendments are added by opponents. If you want to see disability benefit coverage for pregnancy, write to your Senators and Representatives urging support of S. 995 and H.R. 5055 (respectively), without any amendments.

#### VERBS

We'd like to expand our "news" section to include brief notes on people in action. Theologian Mary Daly likes to speak about God as a verb, rather than as a noun; we, in the image of God, are verb-like. We are be-ing and becoming. Do you know a Mennonite or Brethren in Christ woman or man whose action is providing a model for you or others in some aspect of sexuality? Have you researched or written something that might be of interest to Report readers? For example:

--Katie Funk Wiebe's book, Alone: A Widow's Search for Joy is being reprinted; the first 10,000 copies are sold out. Katie, Hillsboro, KS, has also been leading a series of workshops for widows and divorcees.

--Edgar Metzler, Goshen, IN, attended a training session with Warren Farrell, author of The Liberated Man, earlier this year.

--Melanie Zybala, member of the Boston Mennonite Congregation, is teaching women's history at several local colleges and would welcome correspondence with others interested in the subject. Her address is 10 Garden Court St., Apt. 9, Boston, MA, 02113.

How have you been unfolding? Drop us a postcard.

The Report is a bi-monthly publication of the MCC Peace Section Task Force on Women in Church and Society. Correspondence should be sent to Gayle Gerber Koontz, Editor, 27 Fairlawn St., Everett, MA 02149.

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